

# Newark leaders told arts can boost city's image

By LAUREN ROBINSON

Organizers of the first National Black Arts Festival, which drew more than 500,000 people to Atlanta this summer, came to Newark yesterday to kick off National Arts Week and serve as proof that an investment in the arts can boost the economic and social growth of a city.

Invited by hosts Mayor Sharpe James, Essex County Executive Nicholas Amato, Broad National Bank Chairman Donald Karp, the Greater Newark Chamber of Commerce and the Newark Arts Council, some 100 business, civic and community leaders were in Symphony Hall to hear how a cultural activity, which many doubted would succeed when proposed in 1986, brought Atlanta international recognition.

Michael Lomax, a candidate in Atlanta's 1989 mayoral race and chairman of the Fulton County Board of Commissioners in Georgia, said whenever artists move to an area, success is sure to follow.

"There is no better group of urban pioneers than artists. You give them someplace to live and work, and folks will follow. Artists are hip," Lomax said. "Soho and Greenwich Village are what they are today not because of investment bankers but because of artists."

Michelle Smith, executive director of the festival, said the 10-day Atlanta event that featured about 500 performances and exhibits attracted \$1.5 million in funding, aided businesses and more than 2,000 visual and performing artists and gained international exposure for the city. More than 55 art organizations participated.

Lomax, a black who believes he won his political seat in a county in which 65 percent of the voters are white because he supported arts activities, said the economic success of the festival was a bonus to the true success of art—its ability to "build bridges" across societal differences.

He said the event was initiated to exhibit the "rich cultural heritage of blacks" and to develop the human spirit, particularly of young blacks who are seldom encouraged to dream or become creative.

"When you talk about investing in the human potential, it's real hard to get support," Lomax said. "People will



Photo by Jennifer A. Lawson

Attending the National Arts Week brunch in Newark are, from left, Woodson Foundation President Philip Thomas of Newark, Assemblyman Jackie Mattison (D-Essex), National Black Arts Festival Executive Director Michelle Smith of Atlanta and Newark Councilman George Branch

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support jails, but you can't build jails big enough to accommodate all the people we'll need to put in them if we don't reach the children.

"Let's think about the next generation—the children who haven't gone in the wrong direction yet, the children who have so much in them, but nobody has told them they can be creative individuals or shown them what other black people have done."

According to Lomax, the inspiration of the human spirit is "something you can't buy" but an investment that molds the future of any city. He said Newark faces challenges similar to Atlanta's and that art is central to a city's rebirth.

"The incredible fact is that the Atlanta festival went well beyond our hopes," he said. "It took political leadership from the top to raise the private funding. We invested \$100,000 to hire consultants to come up with a plan and invested \$700,000 over two years. From the beginning, it was run like a business and it paid off."

Lomax encouraged Essex County and Newark officials to take the initia-

tive in supporting arts activities and to provide seed money that, in turn, brings private support.

Smith outlined the festival's goals and accomplishments: Producing a "first-class event" that would "capture Atlanta"; creating a national showcase for black art that would attract new audiences; raising money from a "blue-ribbon panel" representing the corporate world, and providing jobs and exposure to a variety of artists.

She cited as keys to the event's success having an advocate to promote the arts in the public sector; operating with a small staff of permanent workers and hiring trained professionals on a contractual basis; allowing professionals the freedom to do their jobs; getting as broad a base of arts groups involved as possible; providing the corporate sponsors with options, such as allowing them to contribute \$100,000 for a major concert or \$25,000 for an exhibit, and having leaders who were "willing to take risks."

"The obvious benefit of an event like this is that the arts offer the opportunity to help define and reinforce the image of a city," Smith said. "Atlanta already had an image of a dynamic city

on the cutting edge, a place where things happen. The artists and public who came can't wait for our next festival"—July 27-Aug. 5, 1990.

"I encourage Newark to create new approaches to developing arts," she continued. "If done well, art can pump money directly into businesses and will instill a sense of pride in a community."

Mayor James, a supporter of the \$200 million performing arts center proposed for downtown Newark, said the guests were invited to encourage leaders who are hesitant to support the arts by investing in such projects.

"A city is more than mortar and bricks. The proposed \$200 million arts center, along with the rail link, will ensure that Newark remains key to the region and that a racial and economic mix is maintained in the city," James said.

"There's no debate when they want to relocate jails or methadone facilities. Cities must also have arts and cultural facilities that enrich and inspire the lives of others. New Jersey, the second wealthiest state in America, can ill afford not to make our cities—Newark, Camden, Trenton and Pater-

son—whole."

Haven Clayborne, 19, of Newark, a flutist and junior at Montclair State College who performed at the brunch with bassist Chris White, said if it were not for the support of arts programs in Newark, he would have pursued another career.

"The programs bought my flute. They have encouraged me and given me exposure and I, in turn, am trying to encourage others," he said. "Newark is a garden for musical and artistic growth, and the center will just help more of us."

Amiri Baraka, a poet and writer from Newark, said he has been trying to encourage political officials to support the arts for years.

"The performing arts center is necessary but will take years to establish even if supported," he said. "Symphony Hall needs to be given over to the community, and the whole district from Lincoln Park to the old Krueger Mansion needs to be developed as a black arts center."

"There is room for the arts center at the Military Park location and an arts center here. We need venues which will cover both exhibition and development," Baraka said. "We'll never have a healthy and strong community as long as the people remain underdeveloped and uninspired."

Christine Vogel, president of the Newark Arts Council, said the brunch was held in hopes not only of enlightening civic leaders about the need for a thriving arts community but also to encourage arts groups to band together for continued success and recognition.